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1. Introduction:

Public protests, riots and other mass incidents are on the rise in China, as the country moves into the 21st century with still breathtaking rates of economic growth. According to various sources, the annual number of registered collective protest incidents in China had risen from 8,700 in 1994, to 58,000 in 2003, 74'000 in 2004, 90,000 in 2006, and some even account for 127,000 such events in 2008, with an increasing peopoerion of them large-scale, i.e. involving 100 or more participants (see Shi, 2008, Tong and Lei, 2010: 488)(Cai, 2010: 30). Such protest incidents include actions such as "disruptive collective petitions, strikes, protests, sit-ins, gatherings, demonstrations, traffic blockades, office blockades, attacks on state agencies, and confrontations with officials or the police" (Cai, 2010: 30) . While the number of publicly visible mass incidents have generally increased and sometimes even involved violent clashes, continued mobilisation of citizens at a smaller scale have equally gained importance as a form of "collective resistance" (Cai, 2010) pursued by a variety of groups, most notably peasants, (migrant) workers as well as homeowners. China's growing cities seem to provide a particularly favourable environment for these forms of grassroot mobilisation, as the numerous accounts of residents' mobilisation at the level of the urban neighbourhood in China's major cities testify.

As spaces where human activities concentrate, cities have been at the forefront of economic, political and cultural change - throughout history and across the world. Cities are places where more general social phenomena and processes materialise locally, where they become visible and also easily readable. Indeed, cities are useful laboratories for social inquiry: they offer the double advantage of propinquity and numerosity, as John (2010) has aptly put it. Propinquity denotes the closeness of the urban as a 'society en miniature', which makes it a tractable unit for empirical research. Numerosity means the multiple occurrence of cities, also within single countries, that ensures variation in dependent or independent variables and enables rigorous comparative research designs. In this sense, we view the study of popular mobilization in cities of China as a promising strategy to achieve a fine-grained understanding of the nature and the development of state-society relations in China more generally. We contend that, as a social phenomenon, urban mobilizations in China are shaped by more general processes of change, triggered by the economic reforms started three decades ago. However, urban mobilizations are not only determined by such developments, they also contribute to

shaping these. Hence, looking at the ways in which urban governments react to and cope with popular mobilization at the city level will provide insights into the current workings and possible future transformation of the authoritarian regime.

In this introductory paper we propose an outline of the theoretical arguments and the conceptual tools that will enable us to 'read' urban mobilizations in China in their wider context. Sections two and three aims to root the topic of urban mobilization in the wider literature on urban politics (section two) and social movements (section three). Section four pulls the arguments together in order to reflect on the changing conditions that have influenced urban mobilisation in the Chinese context, by focusing notably on the transformation of political opportunity structures, mobilizing structures, as well as newly emerging societal issues providing strategic frames for urban mobilisation. The paper concludes with some reflections on the relationship of urban mobilization and wider political developments in Chinese cities.

2. Urban mobilization and urban social movements

Questions related to popular mobilization in the urban realm are a classic theme of urban sociology and politics (see Fainstein and Hirst, 1995, Mayer and Boudreau, 2012). Political protests and civil disturbances that have swept the American and European cities in the 1960s and 1970s made clear that city politics could no longer be seen as limited to (elected) political actors or organised business interests, playing out their influence within the formal institutional channels of urban government. As popular protest rose in the American and European cities, it became clear that established political actors and formal political institutions had become unable to cope with demands of increasingly splintered urban societies. Formally powerless groups of residents and citizens had made clear that, by 'taking to the street', they could gain influence in city politics and become "agents of social change through their effects on popular consciousness and their actions challenging both the process and outcomes of social and political decision making" (Fainstein and Hirst, 1995: 181). In the literature on urban politics, the focus on collective mobilizations 'from below' is now firmly established for the analyses of urban conflicts and power struggles.

In his landmark theoretical contribution to the theme, Manuel Castells (1983) introduced a view of urban mobilization as 'new' social movements. In an explicit rupture with the Marxist approach adopted in his earlier work on urban power (see Castells, 1972), Castells speaks of urban social movements in terms of cross-class alliances over issues of collective consumption in the city. While 'old' social movements are rooted in the class structure and the materi-

alistic antagonisms of industrial capitalism, 'new' social movements cut across classes and are oriented most often by non-material considerations. They aspire at transforming the 'meaning' of the city, more than material aspects of urban life. For Castells, collective popular mobilizations in the city can be seen as urban social movements, when activism gathered around issues of urban public policies transforms into mobilizations that aim at transforming the existing hierarchies that structure urban life more generally.

Castells' approach on urban social movements has, however, been criticised for its assumption that such movements necessarily aspire to overthrow existing structures of domination. Indeed, in much of literature of the 1980s and early 1990s on urban social movements, it is simply taken for granted that these movements pursue progressive goals and aspire to rendering collective consumption more egalitarian, to respecting and emphasising cultural identities and to realising political self-management at the neighbourhood level (Fainstein and Hirst, 1995: 185). Hence, it has been argued that Castells' somewhat teleological perspective on urban social movements' goals should be replaced by a more pragmatic understanding of urban social movements as shaped by contextual conditions such as political institutions and cultural understandings. Pickvance (1985), for instance, has suggested to distinguish between four types of urban social movements according to the goals they pursue. A first type of movements are those that mobilise around unmet demands of housing (e.g. squatters), and that emerge when authorities are overwhelmed by rapid urban growth. A second type of movements is formed by people concerned about access and quality of public services. A third type is formed by movements that rally over demands for increased citizen participation in planning processes or service management. Last but not least, Pickvance suggests to distinguish a fourth type of 'defensive' movements, concerned with preventing projects of urban transformation. Often qualified as *Not-In-My-Backyard* (NIMBY) mobilisations, these latter movements completely lack the progressive agenda assumed in Castells' definition. Their impact on the transformation of urban policies can, however, be quite considerable, as we have shown elsewhere (Kübler, 2000).

In their recent comprehensive overview of the literature on the topic, Mayer and Boudreau (2012) show that this pragmatic perspective has increasingly taken hold in the study of urban social movements. This was particularly the case with North American scholars, whose work on urban mobilisation has increasingly blended in with wider social movement theory, concerned with understanding the conditions that shape and enable political mobilization, as well as their interaction with the state (see section 3 below). Empirical studies have focused not

only on protest movements of urban minorities (e.g. ethnic communities) or interest groups (e.g. homeowner movements), but also on the role of identity-based movements in urban life (e.g. gays and lesbians). In this perspective, urban mobilisation is merely viewed as yet another form of political contention that unfolds in relation to the (local) state. The core research questions formulated in this perspective are the following:

> "What are the effects or outcomes of mobilisation? How do urban movements interact with state authorities? How does such interaction influence a movement's choice of strategies and tactics? What type of resources do movements need in order to be successful? Are protests or moderate strategies more likely to lead to policy change? And, finally, how does the political context in which movements develop contribute to the success of failure of a particular mobilising strategy" (Rabrenovic, 2009: 240).

More recently, however, scholars working on urban mobilisation on both sides of the Atlantic have re-emphasised the legacies of the earlier European perspective on 'new' social movements that views social movements primarily as a force with transformative power (Mayer and Boudreau, 2012: 279). Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's argument about the urban as a particular site of social conflict, culminating in fights over "the right to the city" (*droit à la ville*) (Lefebvre, 1968), they argue that urban social movements are engaged in struggles over different notions of *urbanity*, i.e. over conceptions of the nature of the city as an economic and social system epitomised in but at the same time shaped by its built environment. This not only includes mobilisation against inequalities or social exclusion of urban outcasts, but explicitly also defensive struggles such as anti-gentrification protests, "in which heterogeneous actors seek to save a piece of urbanity or protect their alternative lifestyles"(Mayer and Boudreau, 2012: 287). Hence, in addition to the more general questions on mobilisation in the urban realm as seen above, there is reason to argue that cities provide a specific context for political action that should be taken into account when studying urban social movements. Or more particularly:

> "What is it in urbanity that would energize political action? Is there a specifically urban way of acting politically […]? What is the emancipatory potential of the city today?" (Mayer and Boudreau, 2012: 287).

In other words, the urban context is not only a space where contentious politics takes place, but at the same time an object of struggle.

3. Explanatory factors for protest mobilization

Of course, the study of contentious mobilisation and social movements is by no ways limited to the field of urban politics. Since the 1970s, social movements have been extensively studied by political sociologists in a wide range of fields beyond the urban realm. Women's movements, peace movements, anti-nuclear movements, LGBT movements, environmental movements, to name but a few, have been the object of sustained scholarly attention. The upshot of this "scholarly 'growth industry' in the social sciences" (McAdam et al., 1996: 2) is a quite integrated theoretical perspective and a coherent analytical toolkit for studying the emergence and development of protest mobilisation. This toolkit is mainly composed of three sets of concepts – political opportunity structures, mobilizing structures and framing processes, which we shall briefly discuss one after the other

3.1 Political opportunity structures

The basic idea of the *political process approach* to social movements is that 'political opportunity structures influence the choice of protest strategies and the impact of social movements on their environment' (Kitschelt 1986: 58). Since Eisinger (1973) first introduced the notion of political opportunity structures in his study of protest behavior in American citites, students of social movements have distinguished between 'open' and 'closed' structures, that is, structures which allow for easy access to the political system or which make access more difficult. Open systems allow for more moderate strategies, and give the movements more influence than closed systems, where movements tend to radicalize and to have a difficult time to obtain some effect. Of course, if there is complete closure, such as in authoritarian systems, movements of any kind will have a hard time to develop and to have any impact at all.

Access for social movements to the political system may best be conceived as a two-step process: as outside challengers, social movements first need access to the public sphere in order to draw the attention of the public to their cause. As Schattschneider argued a long time ago, the 'expansion of conflict' beyond those immediately concerned plays a crucial role in politics. Conflicts are 'frequently won or lost by the success that the contestants have in getting the audience involved in the fight or in excluding it, as the case may be' (1988: 4). Access to the public sphere means access to the media. A demonstration that is not reported in the media may just as well have not taken place. Typically, it is only when they get the attention of the public that social movements get a chance of getting some attention and support in the po-

litical system. In the final analysis, the social movements seek, via public support, to have an impact on the decision-makers in the conflict in question. Creating controversy is a way of increasing opportunity by opening media access to movement spokespersons and allies (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 288). If the attention of the public is a necessary condition for access to the political system, it is by no means a sufficient one. The movement needs to find allies within the political system who take up its cause and defend it in the venues of power.

The core of the opportunity structures is made up of formal political institutions. In the first place, the degree of openness of the political system is a function of the degree to which it is democratically organized. Under the conditions of an authoritarian regime, access to the electronic media and the press is particularly difficult for social movements, which is why they are more likely than social movements in democratic societies to rely on *new media* for getting the attention of the public. Moreover, in authoritarian regimes, it is very difficult for social movements to find allies within the political system, even if this may be less difficult at the local level, where urban movements mobilize. At this level, there may be sometimes a greater proximity between authorities and social movement challengers.

The extent to which social movement actors obtain access to the political decision-making arenas also depends on more informal preconditions. Among them, we can count the *prevailing strategies* of the authorities with regard to social movements, i.e. the procedures typically employed by members of the political system when dealing with challengers. We may distinguish between *exclusive* (repressive, confrontational, polarizing) and *integrative* (facilitative, cooperative, assimilative) strategies. These prevailing strategies have a long tradition in a given country and they are related to its institutional structure. Thus, political authorities in authoritarian countries are rather more likely to rely on exclusive strategies than their colleagues in democracies. But even in democratic countries, these strategies vary a lot from one country to the other. Thus, authorities in consensus democracies typically use are more likely to use integrative strategies than authorities in majoritarian democracies. Among the more informal opportunity structures, we can also count the political-cultural or symbolic opportunities that determine *what kind of ideas* become visible for the public, resonate with public opinion, and are held to be 'legitimate' by the audience. Koopmans and Statham (1999: 228) proposed the term *discursive opportunity structure* to denote this type of informal context conditions.

Both institutional and informal structures are influenced by even more fundamental structures, which we should include in our conceptualization of the structural political context in the broader sense of the term. They include the country-specific structure of political conflicts,

and the country's international context. In rapidly changing societies such as the Chinese urban societies, traditional conflict structures may be of lesser importance. However, even local struggles may increasingly be embedded not only into national, but also into international systems of governance open opportunities (such as international pressure on national or local governments) as well as impose constraints (such as pressure from the national government on local authorities) for social movement actors.

3.2 Mobilizing structures and interactions

Mobilizing structures include the organizational structures of the social movements, their modular action repertoires, as well as a range of informal social networks, the everyday life structural social locations that are not aimed primarily at protest mobilization, but where such mobilization may be generated (McCarthy 1996: 141). Movements are rooted in civil society and benefit from the social capital that exists in a given society – at the national or local level. 'Social capital' is an (individual or collective) resource that is embedded in a social relation. Mutual trust between two people, or generalized trust between the members of a given neighborhood would be examples of such a resource. To the extent that they trust each other, people are more likely to engage in collective action.

The boundaries of social movements are inherently disputed, unstable, and ultimately dependent on mutual recognition by the members of the group involved. The people participating in a movement are somehow connected to one another and they share a common goal. Diani and Bison (2004) propose that we speak of a social movement only in cases of conflictual collective action which is based on dense informal inter-organizational networks. No single actor can claim to represent a movement as a whole. Instead, a social movement is constituted by a network of multiple individual and organized actors who, while keeping their autonomy and independence, engage in a sustained, coordinated effort to achieve collective goals.

This distinguishes social movements from organizations such as political parties or interest groups, who are more formally constituted. Parties and interest groups may be part of the network that constitutes a social movement, but movements cannot be reduced to them and they are by no means typical of the more recent movements. In the more recent past (since the 1970s in particular), movements have increasingly been based on non-hierarchical, informal network structures. Their structure has been characterized by the term 'SPIN' – segmented (composed of many groups), polycentric (with many different leaders), integrated networks

(Gerlach und Hine 1970). While participation in formal organizations like parties has been continuously decreasing in Western democracies over the past decades, the readiness to participate in such structures has continuously grown.

What unites all participants in the dense, informal network is a shared strong *common identity*. Collective identities take shape on the basis of the informal networks and, in turn, reinforce them. Organizational and individual actors with a common identity no longer merely pursue specific goals, but come to regard themselves as elements of much larger and encompassing processes of change— or resistance to change. We do not speak of social movements in the case of 'episodic' events of protest or single campaigns that do not have certain duration in time. Social movements involve a protracted series of protest events produced by more or less stable networks of organizational actors. Clearly, there is a considerable variability in their careers and trajectories, as some movements do indeed last for a comparatively short time only, as with most neighbourhood NIMBY oppositions ('Not In My BackYard'), while others endure for decades, as with the labour movement or the women's movement.

The most distinctive of the three defining elements of the social movement is probably the *collective action component*. At its most elementary level, collective action consists of any goal-directed activity engaged in jointly by two or more individuals. It entails the pursuit of a common objective through joint action. To identify the specificity of social movements, it is useful to distinguish the collective actions that are characteristic for it. As it turns out, the modular action repertoire of social movements as we have known it for decades is currently undergoing rapid change. As we have learnt from the Arab spring, the mobilization by the Indignados in Spain, the recent social justice protest in Israel, and from Occupy Wall Street, the occupation of public spaces (in the form of tent camps) has become an important element of a new action repertoire of protest. At the same time, digital platforms and social media in particular have become key mobilizing channels. For the case of the Arab spring, a prelimnary analysis by Wilson and Dunn (2011: 1269) suggests that, while digital media use was not dominant in Egyptian protest activity, 'digital media use – and social media especially – were nevertheless an integral and driving component in the media landscape'. This is particularly obvious in the role Twitter played in actively and successfully engaging an international audience in the Egyptian revolution. Similarly, Anduiza et al. (2012) show for the 15M demonstration of the Spanish Indignados that protesters were primarily mobilized by digital media and personal networks, and that formal membership in established organizations was much less important for their mobilization than for other, contemporary Spanish demonstrations.

3.3. Framing processes

The interaction between social movements and the authorities is the level where structures and configurations are linked to agency and action, and it is at this level that the *strategies of the social movements and their opponents* come into view. 'Strategy' is the conceptual link actors make between the places, the times, and the ways they mobilize and deploy their resources and the goals they hope to achieve. In elaborating their action plans, the actors are taking into account and exploiting the rules of the game as well as the possible reactions of their adversaries. That is, strategic action is strategic *inter*action, 'in which you face other players who regard you strategically, just as you do them, and engage in a series of actions in response to others, anticipating their reactions in turn' (Jasper 2006: 6). Conceptualization of strategic action is particularly difficult, since in strategic action, as Jasper (2006: 171) points out, 'there are few rules …. but many choices'.

Movements differ with respect to their 'strategic capacity', i.e. their capability of developing effective strategy, which is determined by *leadership* and *organization* (Ganz 2000). Differences in strategic capacity may explain why some new organizations fail while others survive, and they may at the same time account for less adaptive behavior among older organizations. Movement actors will make their strategic choices on the basis of their appreciation of the specific chances of reform and threat, and the specific risks of repression and facilitation they face. As Gamson and Meyer argue, the definition of opportunity, that is, the appreciation of the concrete situation, is typically highly contentious within a social movement and they suggest that 'we focus on the process of defining opportunity and how it works' (1996: 283). The debates within movements typically turn around questions of 'relative opportunity' for different courses of action. Opportunity may shift in favour of some specific part of the movement, the radicals for example, and may result in a radicalization of the movement as a whole. According to the political process approach, however, the 'relative opportunities' are to a large extent determined by the configuration of actors and the structural context. In other words, the outcome of the internal debates of the movements is constrained by the larger political context, which the strategically oriented movement actors will not fail to take into account in their deliberations.

In addition to the choice of the action repertoire, a particularly important strategic choice refers to the movement's message and they way to present it in the general public. This is what

is referred to by the concept of framing. Under contemporary conditions, information is not a scarce good, but the scarce factor is given by the *attention* for particular informations. At any given moment, the attention of the public can only be focused on a limited number of political problems. Accordingly, the *struggle for attention* constitutes a key element of politics more generally, and the goal of any social movement is to draw attention to its own cause. The relative strength of an actor's frame as compared to his opponents turns out to be the most important dimension in this respect (Chong and Druckman 2007a). While the reasons why one frame is stronger than the other still need to be clarified, it has been suggested that, in addition to the *credibility of its source*, the strength of a frame depends on its *resonance/congruence with central cultural themes* (Chong and Druckman 2007b: 110, Entman 2004: 14). This may explain why populist frames appealing to the sentiments of anxiety, disenchantment and ressentiment of the 'common man' and his allegedly superior common sense have an advantage over more sophisticated frames. This may also explain why introducing considerations that appeal to widespread *stereotypes* as well as to the *received wisdom* in a given society is likely to have a strong effect, while innovative, unconventional or unexpected framing is likely to have little effect at all.

But movements not only seek to get the attention of the public, they also try to influence its views on the issue of concern to the movement. Strategies attempting to influence the public's views can either appeal to the public's reasoning by providing persuasive arguments, or they can appeal to its emotions. Emotional appeals are communications intended to elicit an emotional response from the public. The distinction between cognitive arguments or frames and emotional appeals is not as clear-cut as it may seem at first sight. Movements strategists must weave together a cognitive and emotional package of appeals to convince the public of its claims (Goodwin et al. 2001: 16).

4. The changing conditions for urban mobilisation in China

If we want to understand the intensifying urban mobilisation in China, we need to look to at the conditions for urban mobilisation relating to political opportunity structure, mobilizing structure as well as framing processes. In the following, we argue that a number of changes in all three conditions have taken place since the 1990s in China and that are particularly felt in the cities.[1]

[1] Our knowledge on these processes of change is, for the time being, incomplete. The following account is based mainly on the publications by Guo (2007), Shi (2008), Ren (2011) as well as Dong (2010).

4.1 Political opportunity structure: decentralisation and the fragmented state

Linked to the economic reforms is the overall trend towards *decentralisation*. According to some observers, central-local relations in China have seen subsequent waves of decentralisation. The economic reforms entailed decentralisation of decision-making within the state: property rights were decentralised to local governments, who thereby gained considerable clout in the system of intergovernmental relations. A second wave of decentralisation resulted from the relaunch of the economic reform after 1992. Some observers have described the current situation as *de facto federalism* with negotiations between the centre and the sub-national entities being a core element of Chinese politics.

This trend of decentralisation blends in with the measures taken by the Chinese Communist Party and the government to promote "good governance" (Guo 2007). This not only entails the improvement of administrative capacity, but also participative procedures of policy-making, especially at the local level. Elections of village committees have been introduced in the 1980s, elections to urban neighbourhood councils in the 1990s (Dong, 2010) . In addition, city governments have increasingly incorporated urban residents into the government system of administrative control. Although these reforms have been initiated in a 'top down' way and remain somewhat limited , they open up opportunities for policy innovations associated with social dynamics in the urban society.

In spite of its one-party regime, the Chinese state has become much more fragmented as a consequence of decentralisation: "The authoritarian Chinese state is no longer as monolithic as it was during command economy […] The discrepancies among government agencies have expanded, which may result in conflicts within the administrative system" (Shi, 2008: 252). State control has become less stringent, which incites protest mobilisation outside the state apparatus.

Decentralization opens up opportunities for citizens at the grass-roots. This is discussed in a paper by Liu (2008), who shows that state-led community governance reforms may provide institutional resource that promote civic engagement and neighbourhood activism. His study of such a process in Shanghai argues that the originally intended function of political control unexpectedly turned into empowerment by providing vibrant institutional spaces and resources for local residents to broaden their horizontal interactions.

In addition, the large scale privatizations opened up opportunities for litigation. Thus, the privatization of housing has turned China into a country with one of the highest homeownership rates in the world. The landmark Property Rights Law, passed by the State Council in 2007, has further provided legal support for housing rights activism (Ren 2011). The expanded legal system has broadened the legal tools that citizens can use to defend their legally guaranteed rights.

4.2 Mobilizing structure: new social constituencies, new grievances, new networks

The market-oriented reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s have had consequences well beyond the economic sphere. More particularly, they have created a number of new social constituencies with their own grievances. Two of them are particularly important with respect of urban mobilization: homeowners and migrant workers.

The housing privatization reforms introduced in the 1980s have transformed large numbers of urban residents into private homeowners, and thereby created a constituency of new stakeholders interested to influence policy-making processes at the local level. Additionally, the shift away from the work unit as the basic unit of urban governance has increased the importance of residents' committees in social interactions. Horizontal networks (e.g. homeowners committees) have become more important in China. Under the slogan of 'weiquan', homeowners are increasingly prepared to stand up for their rights of ownership, often through non-confrontational action organized by associations of homeownership. Yip and Jiang (2011) trace the strategies that homeowners have used to create horizontal cooperation among such associations to defend the rights of homeowners.

Besides the emergence of a new urban middle-class, urban mobilisation increasingly entails uprisings - and even riots - of urban have-nots. This includes, in particular, the mobilisation of groups pertaining to the large number of migrant workers who are present in many Chinese cities and who are often denied essential social rights. Indeed, the state is unwilling or unable to address labor rights abuses and to attend to the welfare needs of migrant workers. Non-governmental organizations[2] have increasingly filled this gap, mostly working in three areas: legal aid, delivering services (education for children, vocational training, medical aid), as well as building solidarity and networking. Even though these NGOs are all tightly controlled by

[2] See, for example:China Labour Bulletin, which records strikes on a daily basis. http://www.clb.org.hk/en/node/100001

the state, they have heightened their rights awareness and fostered collective identity of migrant workers (Ren, 2011). A report published in January 2012 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) says that, compared with those in 2010, the strikes of 2011 were better organized, more confrontational and more likely to trigger copycat action[3]. Protests have increased most rapidly in areas with rapid migrant population growth.

How do workers engage in collective action where opportunities for formal organization are frequently denied, as is the case in China? In line with our general argument about social movement mobilization, Becker (2012) argues that in situations, where formal interaction is prohibited, protest is facilitated through the social capital of informal ties, which provide both material support and information. He provides evidence that 'urban ties, links that develop between migrants with no prior connections before moving to the cities, provide information vital to action, helping workers learn of new protest options, navigate formal institutions, connect with others sharing similar disputes, and identify additional resources' (p. 1381f.). Hence, community networks are forming in China's cities - not only within the new middle class, but also among migrant workers - thereby providing "micro-mobilization contexts" (McAdam, 1988) and the social capital for these groups that influence their propensity and capacity for collective action.

Most importantly perhaps, the advent of the *new media* provides a whole range of new tools for the organising of collective action. In the past three decades, China has seen a dramatic change in its media system. Not only has there been an increase on the number of mass media outlets. The revolution in global information technology has also made the internet, e-mail and cell-phones widely available.

Today, China is the country with the largest number of "netizens" in the world (500 million). The internet undoubtedly is a major channel for public debate in China. The flow of information in all kinds of media has exploded. As a consequence, Chinese citizens show more interest in and have more knowledge of political affairs. For the government, the internet also provides a valuable means to understand public opinion, to implement policies, and to monitor unresponsive public services or corrupt officials. The new, digital action repertoire has reached China as well, and holds out great promise for the mobilization of citizens in China.

Thus, Zheng and Wu (2005) argue that, in addition to providing alternative sources of information and to promoting the public sphere and civil society, the Internet can be used as an ef-

[3] The Economist, January 28th 2012: p. 18

fective tool to organize collective action. In China, the Internet has not led to the development of an autonomous civil society. Nevertheless, there are successful collective political actions via the Internet. Examples cited by Zheng and Wu include the mobilization against the SARS epidemic in November 2003 in Guangdong province, the death of Sun Zhigang in March 2003, and the Sun Dawu event in May 2003, which led to major concessions on the part of the responsible government.

However, the authorities are learning fast how to counter this new, web-based mobilization strategy. As is observed by Dalacoura (2012: 69) and Anderson (2011), the hype which has surrounded the use of social media in the Arab spring in particular obscures the fact that governments used them for their own purposes or simply shut them down. For instance, in the weeks leading up to the fall of Mubarak internet access was often blocked in Egypt. The Chinese example documents the capacity of authorities to adapt to the possibilities of the new media. As MacKinnon (2010) points out on the basis of the Chinese example, authoritarian regimes rapidly learn how to deal with these new media and pour unprecedented resources into building their capacity to influence and shape digital communications networks in direct and indirect ways. The internet may even enhance the life of authoritarian regimes, by providing them with deliberative venues to bolster regime legitimacy (He and Warren 2011). MacKinnon (2011: 44) suggests that without some baseline conditions of rule of law, transparency and accountability, opposition, dissent and reform movements ‚will face an increasingly uphill battle against progressively more innovative forms of censorship and surveillance'. In other words, there is certainly no easy technological fix to overcome the obstacles to political mobilization.

4.3 New frames that resonate?

The strength of protest mobilizations not only depends on political opportunities and mobilizing strucutures, but also on the cognitive and emotional performance of the package of appeals that is woven together to convince a larger audience and attract allies. Protesters thereby seek to connect their claims in a way that resonate with wider *frames* known to gather public attention. Our knowledge about such strategic framing of urban mobilization in China is incomplete. However, there is evidence of a number of new societal issues that find resonance in the wider Chinese public, and to which protest mobilization has tended to connect.

Cai (2010: 197) has emphasised two such frames: citizens' rights, as well as the misconduct of local officials (i.e. abuse of power or corruption). Indeed, discussions of citizens' rights are quite common in the Chinese media. As information flows have improved, reports of cases of violations of citizens' rights are more common. This has heightened citizens' awareness of their rights and their knowledge of (legitimate) ways to protest against violations of these rights. Similarly, examples of misconduct of local officials are also widely debated in the media. Abuse of power or corruption by local governments are not only regarded as unacceptable by the wider public, but also by higher level governments. Focusing on misconduct, abuse of power and corruption of local officials can thus be seen as a promising way of framing protest claims in urban mobilization (Cai, 2010: 189). Guobin Yang, in his study on online activism in China, has suggested that the protection of the environment, as well as consumer-rights are also powerful frames that resonate well with the wider audience (Yang, 2011: 94 ff.). Claims relating to environmentalism and consumer-rights activism are congruent with government goals – sustainable development; product safety – and therefore widely debated in the Chinese media. Hence, in order to fully grasp the relationship of urban mobilizations to the wider political culture, it would be necessary to focus to what extent such mobilizations are strategically framed in order to connect to wider societal issues such as citizens' rights, consumer rights, environmental protection, the fight against misconduct of local officials, or others.

5. Conclusion: urban mobilisations and political devleopment in China

The goal of this paper was to formulate an analytical perspective for understanding urban mobilizations in China. In order to do so, we suggest to draw on three well-known concepts of social movement theory, namely political opportunity structures, mobilizing structures, as well as framing strategies. We argue that changes that occurred since the onset of economic reforms in China have influenced the conditions for urban protest mobilization at all three levels. The use of the new media is crucial in this context, as the new media not only provide a new element in mobilizing structures, but have also contributed to raising the consciousness of the wider public for societal issues that can be used in framing strategies by protest mobilizations. Of course, our knowledge of these conditions is incomplete and our conclusions can therefore only be tentative at the moment.

In general, the Chinese party-state has proved quite resilient against protest mobilization up to now. In spite of recurrent protest events throughout the country, citizens in general tend to have a high level of trust in the Chinese central government (Cai, 2010: 194). Nevertheless, the steady increase in protest events over the last years clearly shows that the existing mechanisms of conflict resolution clearly have their limitations.

In order to understand the transformative power of urban mobilization in China, it is important to assess its impact. According to Cai, 'many instances of collective action in contemporary China do not qualify as social movements because they are, with few exceptions, short lived and are not sustained challenges against state authority" (Cai, 2010: 184). Urban mobilizations in China are often limited, specific and clear to state authorities – they are in most cases non-political or non-regime threatening. But this is not to say that they remain without effects. Indeed, the Chinese government pays close attention to the outbreak of social protests and instability. Responses typically consist in compensation to injured parties, as well as punishment of officials or agencies directly responsible for popular grievances. The goal is to handle protest locally - thereby again emphasising the role of the local level. Thanks to decentralisation, local authorities have indeed considerable discretion in choosing their strategy of handling protests. Many local officials show a pragmatic behaviour guided by a 'trouble-saving mentality' (Cai, 2010. 192). True, many local governments throughout China have tightened control and increased repression of protest – a strategy which is supported by the central government. There are others, however, that have implemented new channels of contact and deliberation between the authorities and citizens. Hence, it would be interesting to investigate the reasons for these differences in strategies. In addition, it is evident that major efforts have recently been devoted, by many city governments in China, to developing internet based tools (e-government) deemed to increasing the possibilities of staying in touch with their citizens. Hence it is important to understand the role of these internet-based tools play in shaping state-citizen relationships in China. Indeed, as Manuel Castells has aptly put it (2000), the electronic media have become the new space of politics in the 21st century.

6. References

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